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BLOGPOST A Guide to Communicating Successfully in a Crisis



Because your company or organisation is always potentially exposed to a crisis, you should stay aware and be appropriately prepared. Whether the onset of a crisis will cause lasting damage or a company emerges stronger from it depends largely on how the crisis is managed and communicated. This guide explains how you can optimally prepare to communicate a crisis, what should be included in a professional crisis communication handbook and what the factors for successful crisis communication are.

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1. Classifying a crisis: Crises, crisis management and crisis communication

Because there are so many different causes and types of crises and how to handle them is accordingly diverse, no one corporate crisis is going to be like another. Therefore, it is all the more important to have the fundamental mechanisms in place for

sustainable crisis management and professionally communicating of a crisis in order to handle potential emergencies.

1.1 What is a corporate crisis?

First, it is crucial to know how to define a crisis and the different types of corporate crises. In communication, crises are unintentional, adverse situations which companies either cause themselves or get caught in through somebody else's mistakes. In either case, they can seriously damage a company's reputation or even threaten their ability to remain a going concern. A crisis can be triggered internally and/or externally and differ greatly in its impact. External causes include natural disasters such as storms, floods, fires, earthquakes, and epidemics; or it can originate from a terrorist attack or sabotage, or crimes such as a cyberattack or extortion. Internal causes can be technical or human error (e.g. accidents or errors in production, compliance or management).

Although a business crisis can take on many different forms, they often consist of three phases. Something triggers the emergence of a crisis and, in this phase, there can be more or less public and media attention. The crisis reaches its peak during the next phase before subsiding in the final phase, when public perception fades accordingly.

1.2 What does crisis management and crisis communication involve?

Both the management and communication of a corporate crisis crucially depend on how it unfolds. Therefore, a professional crisis management team will assess the exposure to risk and any potential crisis from it, set priorities, define strategies and decide upon what action to take in the event of a crisis. The team also determines responsibilities for preventing a crisis and is likewise active in managing an acute crisis. Crisis management is a long-term process encompassing all areas of a company.

Communication plays a central role in crisis management because it can either contribute intrinsically toward overcoming a crisis or have the opposite effect if it has not been professionally set up. Crisis communication, also called Crisis PR, incorporates all internal and external communication that takes place before and especially during and after a critical incident occurs. Here, the team conceptualises, manages and controls all information flows between the company and its stakeholders. They provide information about the causes, effects and course of the crisis, answering questions about the incident as they seek to minimise damage and restore confidence in the company. The top priority when communicating a crisis should therefore be openness, honesty, transparency, clarity and comprehensibility. The essential success factors of crisis communication is described in more detail in [Section 3.5](#).

1.3 Crisis communication tools

These can be categorised as internal and external tools. The most important channels of internal communication are the corporate intranet, newsletters and e-mails, town halls and staff meetings, telephone calls between the people directly involved and helpline services. Digital collaboration tools (e.g. slack, zoom, teams) that are already established in the company can also be used. Appropriate external crisis communication tools for communicating a crisis externally are press releases and conferences; mailings to customers, suppliers and partners; helpline services and the Internet, including the corporate website, social media channels and dark sites. Conversations directly with important stakeholders are likewise suitable for communicating a crisis externally.

In crisis situations, a dark site can be a major tool. It is a specifically prepared website containing all necessary information, recommendations and guidelines, along with telephone numbers and contacts for potential crisis scenarios. A dark site can be activated immediately and updated regularly in an acute crisis.

2. Preparing for potential crises

Anybody prepared for a crisis can avert one at best, or at least significantly limit the negative impact. Crisis prevention is hence one of the most important components of crisis management. Crisis prevention includes the establishment of early warning systems, a crisis communication handbook with firm rules and action to be taken in emergencies, and in the best possible way preparing staff that would be involved in crisis communication for any crisis that might occur.

Crisis communication starts long before a crisis. Whoever is building long-term and continuous stable relationships with their (not only media) reference groups builds the foundation for successfully communicating a crisis when it actually occurs.

2.1 Identifying a potential crisis at an early stage: Issue management

Crisis prevention means perceiving signals of potential conflicts as early as possible. That is why companies should be practising how to manage issues. Issue management provides a company with relevant information on topics and issues of interest or to stakeholder groups. Through systematic observation and with the help of forecasting techniques and opinion analysis, the issues are reviewed and evaluated. The aim is to identify possible exposure to risks - as well as potential opportunities - beforehand while taking communication-related measures to actively influence the development of these issues.

An essential issue management tool is ongoing monitoring of the media and the internet. This helps to identify critical issues early and better assess the issues as they develop. For this purpose, those responsible for managing and communicating a crisis define the relevant keywords alongside the topics and stakeholders to be monitored. Critical topics can spread quickly, especially in social media. So it makes perfect sense to take social media monitoring into account. In an acute crisis, monitoring should be switched to real-time monitoring in order to assess the current situation as completely as possible and react quickly to it.

2.2 Identifying risks and stakeholders

Issue management lets your company assess potential risks, enabling it to anticipate all conceivable crisis scenarios that could have an impact. Make sure representatives from all departments are involved in the analysis in order to achieve a holistic view of

your company. Concrete risks identified this way should then be incorporated into the core of crisis management, the crisis communication plan and the crisis communication handbook (also frequently called a crisis manual).

Preparing for a crisis also includes defining the target groups for each crisis scenario that would be directly or indirectly affected were it to occur. Taking such a step is critical so that later, when communicating an acute crisis, appropriate messages can be sent that reach particular target groups. The crisis communication handbook lets stakeholders view crisis scenarios, create text modules aimed at a specific target group and define channels. A crisis might be readily communicated to any of the groups below:

- Internal target groups: current and former employees (or members of these groups)
- External target groups: Customers, partners, suppliers, service providers, media, politics, neighbours, associations and shareholders.
- Any organisation involved in crisis management such as public authorities, fire brigades, police departments, municipalities and data protection officers.

Regardless of the crisis type, always follow the principles of 'those affected before anyone else' and 'internal before external'. In a crisis, staff should always be the first and most important contact persons. The company has a duty of care towards them and, additionally, they are important multipliers.

2.3 The core of crisis management: Crisis Communication Handbook

The central crisis management document is the crisis communication handbook. It is best prepared by a team that usually includes management, communication officers and representatives from key business areas like IT, legal, HR, finance, sales and customer service. The crisis communication handbook specifies how to define a crisis, what possible concrete crisis scenarios can exist and the procedures, structures and communication tools to use in the event of a crisis. This requires a definition of responsibilities and functions, how to regulate processes, accessibility and behaviour when a crisis occurs, and which tools are to be used. Critical details and special considerations in each individual case can be added through illustrations, sample documents, text modules and checklists.

Simple language should be used in the handbook, it should be clearly structured and the handbook should be available to all members of the crisis team in both hard and soft copies. Make sure everybody always has the latest version. Even if not every crisis can be mapped in advance, the handbook should consistently clarify responsibilities, structures, procedures and prepared content and thus be an essential condition for effective and rapid communication in the event of a crisis.

The crisis communication handbook could be structured as indicated below or contain the following elements:

1. Fundamentals

- General principles for dealing with crises
- Definition of a corporate crisis
- Potential risks and any corporate crises that would result from them
- Corporate crisis reporting and information chains
- Those responsible for the crisis handbook and the most recently updated version

2. Crisis organisation

- Composition of the crisis management committee and team
- Tasks and roles of crisis management committee and team
- Crisis management processes and cooperation in managing a crisis
- Communication channels in a crisis within the team or committee

3. Crisis communication

- Crisis communication objectives, guidelines and rules
- Crisis communication team responsibilities and processes
- Spokesperson roles
- General messages
- Crisis-specific messages
- Stakeholders
- Strategies and language rules
- Internal and external crisis communication channels
- How to respond to the media and social media in a crisis
- Documentation

4. Appendix

- Contact lists including crisis team/committee positions, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses and availability
- Other relevant internal and external contacts (e.g. key media, authorities and experts)
- Graphical organisational and process structure
- Checklists
- Q&As
- Sample documents
- Site plans, maps and other material

2.4 Getting staff and technology ready for crisis situations

Critical issues can pop up in any department at a company. To keep them from developing into a crisis, procedures and responsibilities in such cases have to be clearly defined and the entire staff needs to know them. Everybody employed with the company should know what its critical issues are, whom they should tell and through what channel. The procedures should be regularly communicated at ongoing intervals in order to raise the highest possible awareness of potential crises.

Since a crisis is always an extremely stressful situation for those directly involved - usually the crisis team and crisis committee - it also makes sense to practise such situations regularly. When a real emergency occurs, they can then fall back on the procedures they have already theoretically followed. Crisis simulations afford greater certainty and highlight potential weak links in the processes. Crisis training allows not just processes, but even prepared communication strategies, content and language rules to be reviewed and practised. It is recommended, in particular, for the appointed spokespersons to receive media training so they can in an emergency handle the situation as confidently and routinely as possible. Nonetheless, anybody else that would have to communicate externally in a crisis, for example because they are in charge of a customer hotline, should be likewise trained in how to act in a crisis and know the linguistic guidelines to follow.

The technical infrastructure should accordingly be designed for a crisis, too. Therefore, preparation for a crisis likewise includes considering the channels that can be used to communicate with internal and external target groups were, for example, access to the company's own IT systems not be possible. In an acute crisis, a so-called 'dark site' switched online at very short notice is definitely worthwhile. Examples of what it should provide include information on the status quo, instructions, details about contacts, accessibility and an FAQ section.

3. Communication during a crisis

Rapid action is required in any incident the company has defined as a crisis. Here it pays to fall back on structures and processes ready to be put in place for managing a crisis and communicating it. The sections below show the procedures to follow during a crisis and how to communicate it optimally.

3.1 Activating a crisis committee and real-time media monitoring

When a crisis occurs, the crisis management committee and crisis team are convened as described in the crisis communication handbook and real-time media monitoring is activated. Depending on the size of the company and the scale of the crisis, it may make sense to establish a separate crisis communication committee. Examples of members that could be included are the head of corporate communication, a spokesperson communicating outside the company, a person responsible for internal communication, press and media observers, content producers and chief officers for social media, documentation and the website (to activate the dark site).

3.2 Clarifying the issues and assessing the situation

The crisis management committee and crisis team's first task is to clarify the facts. To do this, they need to answer the most important Wh-questions:

Wh-questions to ask in a crisis:

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Who is involved/affected?
- How did it happen? (mostly speculation as the crisis unfolds)
- Why did it happen? (mostly speculation as the crisis unfolds)
- What measures have already been taken?
- Has the crisis already been publicised?

The situation should be assessed from the facts on the ground once these questions have been answered. When making the assessment, the following questions should be asked:

- What are the potential impacts on the company from the incident (image and financial damage; local, national, international reach)?
- How is the incident affecting internal and/or external target groups?
- How high is the risk of media/public escalation?
- What type of media requests might there be?

Assessing the situation lays the groundwork for further action to be taken by the crisis management committee and is simultaneously a major prerequisite for defining the appropriate communication strategy in the specific crisis and deriving adequate communication of it. As the crisis unfolds, the situation may need to be reassessed and additional information released as new facts emerge.

When assessing the situation, those responsible for communicating the crisis among the team should always have potential responses ready for those affected, the media and other relevant stakeholders on their radar and include them as they evaluate the communication strategy and how they intend to communicate.

3.3 Defining relevant target groups and communication steps to take

Having assessed the situation, both the crisis management committee and the crisis team should now be ideally identifying the stakeholders already described in the crisis communication handbook and also in the communication strategy and procedures, adapting them to the specific crisis situation.

At this step, the most important questions to ask are:

- Which target groups should be informed?
- What messages and information should be communicated to them?
- Which channels should be used to inform them?
- When should they receive the communication?

Core messages for communicating the crisis can now be drafted from the issues involved and assessment of the specific situation. The crisis communication handbook might already contain templates for general or case-specific messages that now need to be adapted to the specific situation. Formulate the core messages so they become the base for all communication formats.

Core messages should do the following:

- Present the issues in a factual and coherent manner
- Put the issues in an overall business context and evaluate them
- Express your stance on the specific situation (authentically and in a value-based way)
- Present solutions as short and medium-term coping strategies
- Include a personal statement, if appropriate to the situation
- Express empathy (i.e. concern, regret and, where necessary, apologise to those affected)
- Look ahead and emphasise future strategies that ensure the crisis or something similar never happens again

3.4 Critical tools for communicating internally and externally

Once the core messages are in place and all the relevant target groups have been defined, the time now comes for action to be taken. Speed is particularly important here in order to limit the damage to the greatest possible degree. The core messages should be stringently communicated to all internal and external stakeholders equally (one voice policy). However, always communicate to internal target groups before external ones. Therefore, the crisis management committee and the crisis team should be defining how announcements will be precisely timed (who will be informed, when, through which channels and communication tools) before they disseminate the information.

Ideally, the [communication channels and tools](#) for crisis situations should have already been defined in the crisis communication handbook and are accessible to people in positions of responsibility, and for access data to be also kept therein.

Common tools for communicating an internal crisis are mailings, internal town halls and the intranet because they reach all employees simultaneously and directly. A Q&A format is accordingly very efficient, as it picks up key messages from the replies to critical questions around the crisis topic. They either can or should be continuously updated or expanded.

The most common tool in communicating a crisis externally is a [press release](#) that simultaneously reaches all major media and gives journalists a contact option for enquiries. In crucial or prolonged crises like a plant accident, major restructuring or a closure with many redundancies, a press conference is also useful because it offers more space for context and an exchange beyond the pure facts found in a press release. Finally, a Q&A format for external target groups such as customers, partners and service providers has also proven its worth.

3.5 Critical crisis communication success factors

Crisis communication seeks to avert potential reputational damage and counteract loss of trust. There are clear rules to follow during an acute crisis for successfully crisis communication:

1. Communicate quickly, proactively and continuously.

Once a crisis has unfolded, act quickly (but please do not rush). Since the question of blame too often emerges at the onset of a crisis, proactive communication is essential to keep from getting put on the defensive. Remaining silent or issuing a 'no comment' are hardly solutions during an acute crisis because they only make room for speculation or even negative reporting and quickly leads to you losing control of the situation.

Give ongoing updates on new developments, findings, and identifying the next steps or action to take to stay in control of communications. Likewise, keep the flow of information coming to affected stakeholders.

2. Communicate in a consistent and clear, understandable way.

Define a uniform language rule for communicating a crisis (ideally already defined in the crisis manual). Think carefully about the words and phrases you select and keep using them across all communication formats. It makes a difference, for example, if you talk about a merger in one instance and a takeover in another, or first restructuring and later redundancies.

Everyone involved in communicating the crisis should definitely be speaking with one voice. Any contradictory statements coming out of the same company will eventually lead to uncertainty or misunderstandings both among media professionals and other target groups, fuel rumours or, in the worst case, result in false reporting.

Formulate clear, short and thereby easily understandable messages nobody can misunderstand. At all costs, avoid 'technical

jargon'. When you describe technical issues, do it in a way ordinary can understand.

3. Be honest, open and transparent.

While communicating openly and honestly goes without saying, it is not always easy to do in a crisis because you will be quickly (and even unconsciously) putting yourself on the defensive. But once the media and other target groups lose trust in you, it can take a long time to repair the damage to your image.

So admit possible mistakes and explain transparently and truthfully how the crisis came about. If nothing yet can be confirmed, say so the same way. Allow for 'lack of information' and proactively communicate gaps in knowledge or the limits of your own possibilities. Under no circumstances should you play down any potential or already incurred damage or employ salami slicing tactics to admit to any. In addition, make sure your statements match your actions.

4. Communicate with empathy.

When communicating a crisis, be compassionate towards those affected and be sensitive to all target groups. To do so, rely on dialogue and exchange of communication in order to identify and respond to their needs. Call out feelings such as sadness, anger or dismay. Express your sympathy to stakeholders who have been adversely affected. Through emphatic, personal (and sincere) communication with them, you might still reinforce their loyalty to the company.

5. Assemble a support team.

A crisis requires teamwork. If your company has little or no experience with professionally communicating a crisis, get external help. There are specialists for every phase of a crisis who can support you - whether in crisis prevention, the development of a crisis communication handbook or communication during a crisis. news aktuell can also provide you support in crisis communication. The [ots distribution network](#) lets you distribute your information quickly and easily to a large target group at any time.

6. Stay calm.

Although easier said than done, you should keep your cool during a crisis and not rush into anything nervously. Rash action causes mistakes you will then have to sort out again. Try to imagine in a crisis that there is always a 'before' and 'after'. The vast majority of crisis situations will always be either mitigated or resolved (just as media coverage or public interest will eventually wane). In an acute crisis, taking such an approach will let you deal with the tasks at hand in a more relaxed and yet focused manner.

4. Evaluating crisis management and communication

After an acute crisis has subsided, there should always be a review of it with an assessment. Only after evaluating the processes, strategies, measures and tools can the crisis management committee and team learn important lessons from it and incorporate what they have found out into future processes. When analysing the crisis you have just gone through, ask yourself the following questions:

- What caused it and what options do you have to minimise the risks of a recurrence?
- What could the company have done to prevent it?
- Dealing with a crisis: Which procedures and structures have proven successful in the past? To which communication measures and tools do you turn? How confidently did the spokesperson come across? In which areas is there potential for optimisation?
- Where does the crisis manual need to be accordingly reworked? Does it make sense to add further checklists and sample documents?
- How have competitors handled similar crisis situations? Can something be learned from this?

Careful follow-up to a crisis can improve all areas of crisis management, whether preventing a crisis from happening or overcoming an acute crisis. In retrospect, evaluating a crisis always provides an opportunity to look ahead toward combatting future crises.

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